

ON TRACK WITH MDT

If there is one issue that is dear to my heart as director of MDT, it is public safety.

That is a broad-reaching term, of course, and one that has many implications when looking at MDT's goals and activities.

In terms of public safety in Montana, one area of particular concern is the number of accidents and fatalities in which alcohol is involved. In 2003, for example, 2,173, or 9.4%, of all reported traffic crashes in Montana involved alcohol and/or drugs and cost this state an estimated \$170 million in economic losses.

Even more alarming is the fact that 38.9% of fatal crashes in 2003 (93 of 239) were alcohol/drug related. Yes, there are some changes in the percentage of crashes and fatal crashes over the past 10 years that involved alcohol/drugs (see table), but the numbers have not changed substantially. Simply put, we have not yet impacted the way people view drinking and driving in this great state, and people are dying as a result.

Reported Alcohol/Drug Related Crashes in Montana						
Year	All Crashes			Fatal Crashes		
	Alcohol Related	All	Percent of All	Alcohol Related	All	Percent of All
1994	2,245	19,351	11.6%	87	182	47.8%
1995	2,313	20,508	11.3%	71	186	38.2%
1996	2,156	24,882	8.7%	55	177	31.1%
1997	2,016	22,619	8.9%	95	223	42.6%
1998	2,142	22,068	9.7%	76	208	36.5%
1999	2,177	21,078	10.3%	93	194	47.9%
2000	2,211	22,254	9.9%	76	203	37.4%
2001	2,035	21,846	9.3%	67	201	33.3%
2002	2,288	23,527	9.7%	86	232	37.1%
2003	2,173	23,160	9.4%	93	239	38.9%
Chg 1 Year	-5.0%	-1.6%	-3.1%	+8.1%	+3.0%	+4.9%
Chg 5 Year	+0.1%	+4.5%	-3.9%	+16.8%	+15.1%	+1.2%

Source: TIS - Montana Department of Transportation

Wait a minute, you say, we've passed a .08 BAC law and stiffer penalties for repeat offenders. Yes, we have, but that is not enough. In my estimation, the only way we're going to change the numbers and start saving lives is by changing the mindset that it is okay to drink and drive – and one major step in that process is passing an open container law. We tried in 2003 and failed, much to my chagrin. I hope that the state will fare better in 2005.

There is a lot of talk about the federal sanctions that Montana will receive if we don't pass an open container law. It's true that the pending reauthorization will likely turn the current soft sanctions in to hard sanctions and that Montana will lose millions (right now, \$5.6 million) in construction dollars each year, and that is a factor in this whole issue. It is not, however, the driving force. Safety is.

More than anything, we at MDT are committed to making the roads a better and safer venue for all who traverse our state. We know that drinking and driving is a monumental issue, and we are working diligently to educate the public regarding that fact.

Doing so is the only way to promote change – and change, after all, is key to staying “on track” with, and preserving, the future of our beloved state.

Drive safely, and enjoy the rest of your summer!

Dave Galt
Director